

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today about some of our mutual concerns about WIC and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

When the first WIC Symposium was held two-and-a-half years ago, I was not associated with the Department of Agriculture. I was concerned, as you are concerned, about the problems of hunger and malnutrition in the United States, and with the federal response to those problems.

It was a great challenge to be appointed to a position where my policy decisions would have an effect on the extent of that response. My ego would like nothing better than to claim a lion's share of the credit for the great strides that food assistance programs have made since last you met.

But conscience compels me to give credit where credit is due. And much of it--an awful lot of it--my friends, is due to you.

For example, last year the White House received more letters on the child nutrition amendments than on any other issue except for gun control and the Panama Canal treaties.

As lobbyists, that puts you right up there with the National Rifle Association, the American Conservative Union, and the American Legion. It's not the company you regularly keep, but it certainly reflects your continued dedication to the cause of eradicating hunger in this land of plenty.

You are to be congratulated. Your efforts contributed substantially to the fact that WIC will have a budget of \$750 million in fiscal year 1980.

In a time of budgetary constraints, inflationary pressures, and growing distrust of government social programs, that is an enormous accomplishment. It is also evidence of President Jimmy Carter's commitment to a strong domestic food assistance effort.

Remarks by Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services, at the Second National Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Symposium, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., June 6, 1979.

To put that commitment into perspective, let's go back a little in time.

When President Jimmy Carter was candidate Jimmy Carter, he campaigned on the theme of making government more efficient, more effective, more compassionate.

I think perhaps no program has succeeded better in meeting those goals than WIC.

Look at the record.

In its first full month of operation in January of 1974, WIC served 633 participants in 36 clinics. The budget was \$20 million.

As of November 1978, the program served more than 1.3 million participants--about 287,000 women, 356,000 infants, and 729,000 children--in more than 4,800 clinics. The fiscal year 1979 budget was \$550 million.

WIC is now operated by 49 state agencies, 21 Indian health agencies, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Is WIC increasingly efficient? Well, the 1974 figures--633 participants and a \$20 million budget--breaks out to something like \$31,600 per participant. That's somewhat misleading, of course, because costs of initiating a new program and opening new facilities greatly inflates the per participant figure.

Nevertheless, after a period of rapid expansion--which in itself is often a breeding ground for waste and inefficiency--WIC serviced its 1.3 million participants so far in this fiscal year at a cost of \$423 per participant.

Considering rising food costs and the accelerating inflation, we can all be proud of the increased efficiency in the WIC program.

Is WIC effective?

I think you know the answer. Recent studies by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported significant findings concerning the positive nutritional benefits of the WIC program. Children enrolled for one year showed considerable improvements in their blood values, with those with the lowest hemoglobin and hematocrit values showing the most improvements.

Children with low weight for their height grew significantly during the first six months of participation. There is also strong evidence suggesting the incidence of low-birth-weight babies is substantially reduced through participation by mothers in the WIC program.

Studies by CDC and other researchers illustrate some truly dramatic nutritional gains.

A Yale University Medical School study on WIC participants in Danbury, Connecticut, showed, over several years, a steadily growing impact in reducing the fetal death rate in the high risk population.

An infant growth study showed that WIC participants caught up with non-participants in all measurements of health.

In Michigan, 30 percent of the women were anemic before WIC. After participation, the figure was 6 percent.

Anemia among participating children in Oregon was reduced from 13 percent to 1 percent.

In the Pennsylvania WIC program, the infant death rate was 10.6 percent before participation. It was zero--zero!--afterwards. Immature birth rates decreased from 12.8 percent to 1.6 percent, and pregnancies with complications were reduced from 30.9 percent to 17.6 percent.

Is WIC compassionate?

Ask the 35-year-old diabetic mother from Lincoln, Nebraska, who says she wouldn't have eaten at all well during pregnancy, if it hadn't been for WIC.

She is no longer on the program, but her 20-month and 7-month-old daughters are. She says her marriage would have broken up or the family would have been "out on the street" if it weren't for the help, and the health, they received from WIC.

Indeed, ask any mother whose child, once malnourished or anemic or stunted or listless, attained good blood values, normal growth, and the liveliness of a typical happy child.

If WIC is demonstrably an efficient, effective, and compassionate program, it can best be illustrated by progress in those areas most in need of service and most difficult to assist.

Some of the nation's worst nutritional problems plague American Indians of the west and southwest. We have made some, but not enough, progress there.

The infant mortality rate on seven Indian reservations in Montana declined from 31.5 per thousand to 16.6 per thousand following the introduction of WIC.

Arizona WIC participants recorded an 81 percent reduction in anemia; reduced underweight 82 percent, and improved stature by 64 percent. The Public Health Service Indian Hospital in Tuba City, Arizona, today treats far fewer children for severe nutritional diseases than it did a decade ago. Fewer children there suffer from deficiencies in weight and stunted growth.

I can also report to you some progress with another target population--migrant farmworkers.

The migrant demonstration project of USDA's supplemental food programs division was designed to alleviate barriers that prevented migrants and seasonal farmworkers from fully availing themselves of WIC program services.

It had three objectives.

o provisions of funds to implement or expand WIC projects where there e
is a large migrant population;

- o tracking of participants as they move from Texas into other states within the mid-continental migrant stream and back to Texas, and
- o experimentation with new program services and methods.

A study to evaluate the effectiveness of the migrant effort was initiated last October and completed last month.

The study concluded that the WIC migrant project did indeed serve the population for which it was intended. It indicated that nutrition education was being provided to migrant participants, and that the farmworkers believed it was effective in changing their food habits.

We now know that special program elements and services for migrants are the sound concepts we believed them to be. Some of the elements of this project are being incorporated into regular WIC and commodity supplemental food programs.

Many of the studies I have cited show a positive correlation between WIC and health status. More often than not, WIC participants are introduced for the first time to maternal and child health clinics and to preventive health care such as immunizations. The WIC program is often the initial--indeed the only--access to nutrition education.

Nothing would please me more than to continue a recital of what's right with WIC in particular, and food assistance in general.

But this is the point where your standard stand-up comic would say: "Well, folks, that's the good news."

The bad news--as I'm sure you are all too aware--is that the final WIC regulations and the food package regulations have not yet been published.

We at USDA feel as bad, or worse, about that than you do. I can tell you that the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has completed its work on the final regulations and they are currently undergoing review by the Department and the Office of Management and Budget. They should be out this month.

The food package regulations will also be published late this month.

One reason for the delay is the emergency situation in the food stamp program.

Another reason is that the proposed regulations drew nearly 650 comments and they raised some very significant questions in the areas of income eligibility levels, outreach efforts, and nutrition education.

We felt it essential those comments be reviewed and analyzed very carefully before proceeding with final regulations.

The complex and controversial issues involved in the food package regulations, and the department's efforts to accommodate the legitimate concerns of so many interested parties, have contributed to the prolonged discussions which you have found so disheartening.

You will recall that the funding dockets were out on time, but we are going to re-propose and get additional comments before instituting funding formulas for the next three years.

I mentioned earlier the emergency in the food stamp program, a program in which 40 percent of WIC participants are also enrolled.

Food stamps are under heavy attack and may not survive in their present form.

The efforts of most of you to fight hunger and malnutrition predate mine by many years, but in 1977 we were able to celebrate together the victory you had sought so long--elimination of the purchase requirement for food stamps. You believed that that requirement prevented large numbers of eligible people from participating. You were right!

Today, all over the country, thousands and thousands of new food stamp recipients are being helped by the program.

There were so many--more than we knew--who could not afford to buy in. But they're out there now getting those desperately-needed stamps, and getting them at a crucial time--a time when food price inflation is raising anew the ugly specter of hunger in the midst of affluence.

But in 1977, when Congress eliminated the purchase requirement, it also imposed a ceiling on the amount of money that could be expended on the program in any given year. The ceiling was based on estimates of 3 to 4 percent food price inflation and 5.5 percent unemployment.

We know all too well what happened to food prices.

This administration is committed to fighting inflation, but not on the backs of the poor and the hungry. We have proposed that the cap be raised.

But Congress, my friends, is not wearing a heart for the hungry on its sleeve this year. It's wielding scissors. It is demonstrating a willingness to cut benefits which average the magnificent sum of 35 cents per person per meal. I think that is unconscionable.

But unconscionable or not, let me tell you that when the budget cuts for other programs were announced, the Washington lawyers and lobbyists went to work.

Like everybody else, they were gung-ho to fight inflation--at somebody else's expense.

The dairy lobby wants to fight inflation--but not by cutting the special milk program.

Hospital administrators want to fight inflation--but not if it means hospital cost containment.

Agricultural extension agents and land grant universities want to fight inflation--but not by limiting increases for extension and agricultural research.

Even defense contractors are willing to enlist--but not, of course, if it means trimming the armaments budget.

These people are swarming all over Capitol Hill. And do not delude yourselves, they are being heard. Their budgets will not be cut. They will be raised above the President's requests.

And what about food stamps? Every Member of Congress has heard from someone who saw the lady in the welfare Cadillac using food stamps. And every member remembers Earl Butz's slurs on food stamp recipients. And every member who dares to cast a vote against hunger will find that the radical right has sent press releases to the home district attacking his or her fiscal irresponsibility.

And Members of Congress wonder--why should I help those people? I'll be criticized if I do and lauded as responsible if it don't. Congress is not hearing the other side of the story.

They are not hearing the story that Dr. Wheeler recounted here today.

They don't know that he and his colleagues reported that hunger has been substantially reduced and the reason is food stamps. One of the most reviled of all federal social programs has worked, is working, and can continue to work and prevent hunger--if there is just enough money to buy the food.

The Congress isn't hearing that the necessity for increased food stamp funding springs from the reality of 23 percent food price inflation. The poor are not responsible for food price inflation. And Congress should not ask them to bear its burden disproportionately.

The public may be more titillated by tales of the welfare cheat than the specter of hungry children, but surely the story of hunger deserves telling. The public loves to learn of federally funded boondoggles, but surely we should be willing to acknowledge that there is a federal program that has made a difference--that is achieving its goals, but that may be seriously cut back unless Congress acts.

Last week the House Agriculture Committee voted to increase the support prices for wheat and feed grains. Last week the Senate refused to eliminate an unnecessary \$115 million in federally funded milk purchases. The lobbyists have been at work for their clients. The poor have no lobbyists--except for persons like you.

If food stamp benefits are cut, there will be more hungry children than WIC could ever cope with or compensate.

Food stamps must be saved so WIC can continue to supplement the good that they do.

The situation is critical. Depending on when--and how--Congress acts, we may have to cut benefits by one-half in August, or altogether in September. In the 1980 fiscal year, the program faces a major effort to severely restrict its benefits.

I also want to compliment the Children's Foundation, not just for this symposium, but for its continuing dedication to the cause of child nutrition. I applaud all of you for being here on behalf of a very important and worthwhile program--a program which is reducing the tragic infant mortality rate in this country and improving the health of children who have been seriously malnourished.

WIC has made substantial progress since your last symposium. It is a stronger as well as a larger program today, with improved management controls and, most importantly, more participant involvement at every level.

I cannot urge you too strongly to continue and expand on that client involvement so that the people who benefit from the program can help design the most effective ways to deliver those benefits.

Let me assure you that WIC will continue to have the support of the Carter administration. We will not bow to the inertia of local bureaucracies who don't want to be bothered with clinics and certification. Nor will we listen to the voices of yesterday who see every government social policy as meddlesome intervention and over-regulation.

It is not meddlesome to refuse to let children go hungry or malnourished. It is not over-regulation to help teenage mothers have healthy, full-term babies who can maintain a growth pattern with their peers.

WIC is doing that work. And more.

In the second century before Christ, a Chinese wise man, Mencius, asked: "Is it only the mouth and belly which are injured by hunger and thirst?"

And he answered: "No--men's minds are also injured by them." Over two thousand years is a long time for us to have taken in coming to the same conclusion. Now that we have, we must make up for lost time.

#

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Penalty for Private Use, \$300



POSTAGE & FEES PAID
United States Department of Agriculture
AGR 101

U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE
NATL AGRIC. LIBRARY
RECEIVED

AUG 24 '79

PROCUREMENT SECTION
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS